

50 Years Ago Today, Activists Burglarized the FBI and Exposed Its Undemocratic Abuses

BY
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Fifty years ago today, a group of New Left activists executed a daring burglary of an FBI field office in Pennsylvania, exposing the bureau's COINTELPRO operations against the Civil Rights Movement, anti-war activists, and socialists. We should remember these activists today as heroes.

On March 8, 1971, much of the nation was transfixed by the "Fight of Century" between Joe Fraiser and Muhammed Ali, both undefeated. Or at least that's what eight anti-war activists were counting on. The activists, some of whom traced their roots to the Civil Rights Movement, recognized the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as a political police that posed an existential threat to the movement.

Knowing the FBI was actively spying on anti-war and civil rights activists was one thing, but proving it was another. Inspired by war resisters who broke into draft boards, and physically seized and destroyed documents in order to impede the US slaughter in Vietnam, the activists thought: Why not break into an FBI office?

The group called themselves the Citizens Commission to Investigate the FBI. Though this information wasn't public, the commission included William C. Davidon, a physics professor and peace activist; John C. Raines, a professor of religion who had also been a participant in the Freedom Rides; his wife Bonnie Raines, who was also a peace activist; and Keith Forsyth, a cab driver.

Originally, they had planned to break into the Philadelphia field office. That was implausible, security too tight. But they soon discovered the FBI had another field office in Media, Pennsylvania. The town's secluded nature made it ideal for the job. The eight activists cased the building, studied lock picking, and devised a diversion in case police came.

On the night of the break-in, they had some difficulty picking the lock. But they got in — and emptied the building of every single file they could find. When they started going through the files they very early on came across a document that outlined a plan to target the anti-war movement in order to “enhance the paranoia ... and ... get the point across there is an FBI agent behind every mailbox.”

Their suspicions were correct. The FBI was actively trying to destroy the anti-war movement — the Citizens Commission to Investigate the FBI now had the documents to prove it. And incredibly, they got away with the brazen burglary.



The site of the 1971 break-in of the local FBI office in Media, Pennsylvania. (Wikimedia Commons)

Even though the FBI assigned two hundred agents to solve the mystery of who burglarized the nation’s premier law enforcement agency, the bureau could not find them. Only in 2014, when five of the participants were advised that the statute of limitations had passed, were any of their identities revealed.

The Citizens Commission to Investigate the FBI gave the documents to the media, yet few were willing to expose the FBI. Most journalists, including those at the *New York Times*, actually mailed the documents back to the FBI. Only Betty Medsger of the *Washington Post* was willing to publish the documents. (In 2014, when five of the activists went public, it would again be Medsger who would tell their story).

One of the documents bore a cryptic acronym: COINTELPRO. NBC news correspondent Carl Stern set out on his own quest to discover what exactly COINTELPRO was. He asked officials at the Department of Justice and the FBI, but they were tight-lipped. No one in official Washington would answer his question so he tried a then-novel approach. Stern filed a request under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), which had only been passed a half decade earlier. The FBI tried to get out of complying with the request, but a judge demanded they turn over the documents.

Two years after the break-in, NBC Nightly News reported to the nation that “the late J. Edgar Hoover ordered a nationwide campaign to disrupt the activities of the New Left.”

A Bureau Tasked With Crushing Dissent

The FBI has engaged in no shortage of villainy in its zealous quest to stamp out domestic dissent. It gathered dossiers on radical activists, carried out wiretaps and break-ins, engaged in mass political surveillance, and even drew up a secret list of tens of thousands of people to be detained in the event of a national emergency primarily on the basis of their political views. Today, the FBI frequently treats certain political points of view as a precursor to terrorism, then calls for preventative policing measures, which are inherently political policing.

Yet in spite of this wide list of FBI crimes none has so captured the public imagination as COINTELPRO. For many, COINTELPRO is treated as synonymous with FBI political policing writ large. But to truly grapple with the sinister nature of COINTELPRO, it is important to understand the details of the program.

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COINTELPRO stands for “Counter Intelligence Program.” “Counter intelligence” typically refers to the neutralization of a hostile foreign agent and — generally entails looser adherence to basic constitutional principles than a domestic criminal prosecution. As the Church Committee, a landmark Senate investigation in the abuses of the intelligence agencies triggered in part by the revelations of the Media break-in, stated, these were wartime techniques.

Yet, the committee noted that the full truth was even worse than that. The use of “counter intelligence” was a misnomer. COINTELPRO was in fact a series of domestic covert actions designed to neutralize or disrupt political movements. As the Church Committee put it, the FBI had carried out a “sophisticated vigilante operation aimed squarely at preventing the exercise of First Amendment rights of speech and association.”

To prevent the free exercise of disfavored speech, the FBI used tactics that ranged from nuisances, like falsely publicizing that an event had been cancelled, to deadly, like trying to incite violence between the Black Panthers and the Blackstone Rangers. The intent was to sow discord and disunity among the Left.

FBI agents drafted pamphlets attacking one group falsely claiming them to be written by another. Informants frequently and purposefully accused other activists of being informants in order to create an atmosphere of paranoia. “Friendly” media outlets were exploited to see if they would try to undermine claims of police brutality against demonstrators and spread embarrassing stories about activist’s personal “immorality.”



Fred Hampton in 1968. (Getty Images)

Activists' personal lives were fair game. The FBI had the Boy Scout chapter of a spouse of a Socialist Workers Party (SWP) member disbanded. This program not only destroyed lives — it took them, as seen in the FBI's role in Fred Hampton's assassination.

The Church Committee concluded that COINTELPRO had three primary purposes. The first two, protecting national security and preventing violence, were the FBI's official explanation. While the committee partially accepted this, it also noted that the mission of preventing violence was in contrast to a number of COINTELPRO operations that were clearly designed to *incite* violence. The committee found that a number of COINTELPRO actions could not rationally be tied to either of the FBI's two justifications. They argued that the "unexpressed major premise of the programs was that a law enforcement agency has the duty to do whatever is necessary to combat perceived threats to the existing social and political order."

The Church Committee found there were five domestic COINTELPRO operations targeting the Communist Party, the SWP, White Hate Groups, "Black Nationalist-Hate Groups," and the New Left. (For whatever reason, it did not include the FBI's COINTELPRO operations against Puerto Rican independence groups.) Others have argued that the FBI's actions against the American Indian Movement, which technically postdates the FBI's termination of COINTELPRO, are similar enough in tactics that they should be considered part of the program.

All of these groups were involved in political speech. But as self-appointed guardians of the status quo, the FBI considered it part of their mission to treat these organizations as an enemy within. In fact, that these organizations were engaged in political speech outside the purview of law enforcement is exactly what made them targets for the FBI's COINTELPRO.

Locking Up Radicals

The FBI had long hunted radical groups like the Communist Party and the SWP. With both organizations, the bureau had worked to find ways to jail its members, including prosecuting its leaders under the Smith Act, which made it a crime to advocate overthrowing the government (the SWP was first prosecuted under the Smith Act — a move the Communist Party fully supported at the time, given the SWP's Trotskyism). During the Second Red Scare, the FBI also sought to use various process crimes, such as perjury or contempt of Congress, as a means of locking up Communist Party members.

By 1956, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and head of domestic intelligence William Sullivan became convinced they were running out of law enforcement options against the Communists. They feared the Supreme Court had become too liberal and was ceasing to rubber stamp political prosecutions. Unable to jail their political enemies, the FBI came up with a plan to neutralize and disrupt their political activities. By its very nature, these activities largely targeted lawful political speech.

The FBI's definition of anti-communism was broad. Under its Communist Infiltration (COMINFL) program, the bureau targeted people who were likely to be influenced by communists, or were just "fellow travelers." According to the Church Committee, this included "those taking positions supported by the Communists, such as school integration, increased minority hiring, and opposition to [the House Un-American Activities Committee," a Congressional committee that for nearly four decades investigated and harassed the political beliefs of radicals and others in their orbit. The FBI used this rationale to target the Civil Rights Movement, including Martin Luther King himself.

The FBI quickly expanded COINTELPRO to two of its other favorite targets. The SWP, like the Communists, cited the Bolshevik Revolution as a key influence. As supporters of Leon Trotsky, the Socialist Workers Party took a different line on the Soviet Union than the Communists. Yet

both groups equally supported Cuba's socialist revolution and struggled with each other over who would lead US solidarity efforts with the island. While the Communists and the SWP may have been at each other throats, the FBI's COINTELPRO chief would testify before Congress, "I do not think that the Bureau discriminates against subversive organizations."

Unlike with the Communists, the FBI never claimed the SWP had any connection with a foreign power's espionage against the United States. Instead, they were upset by the group's Trotskyist political ideology and its support for the Cuban Revolution and school integration. The Bureau was particularly disturbed that the SWP ran candidates for office, as doing so allowed them to communicate their ideas to the voting public. Much like with the Communist Party COINTELPRO, the FBI used its license to target the SWP to go well beyond party members, in this case attacking many opponents of the Vietnam War who had nothing to do with the party.



Demonstrators marched from Washington, DC to the Pentagon in 1972 in protest of the Vietnam War; it was mainly organized by the Socialist Workers Party. (Washington Area Spark / Flickr)

FBI field offices in New York City and San Juan opened COINTELPRO operations against Puerto Rican independence groups. In fact, many of the repressive tools created during the McCarthy era were at their inception used to target the Puerto Rican independence movement. The FBI had been carrying out activities against the movement since 1936. It had its own surveillance program

just for the island called the “carpetas” program, during which it created dossiers on a hundred thousand Puerto Ricans.

In spite of the fact that the Department of Justice, of which the FBI is a part, was essentially created to respond to Ku Klux Klan terror during Reconstruction, Hoover’s FBI had done little on the subject. When the brutal lynching of Emmet Till sparked national outrage, Hoover claimed there were no federal laws broken and thus the FBI could not intervene — yet in the 1870s, the Department of Justice had brought thousands of indictments against the Klan and obtained hundreds of convictions. Hoover instead put his efforts toward opposing those calling for a federal investigation into Till’s death, believing such calls were part of a Communist plot and thus fell within his view of the FBI’s jurisdiction.

In 1964, the murder of three civil rights activists and other Klan violence became too much to ignore. The federal government was largely controlled by liberals who, in addition to being staunch Cold Warriors, were also civil rights supporters. They and others began to wonder why the FBI couldn’t deploy the same tactics that were used against Communists against the Klan.

Over internal objections, responsibility for investigating Klan violence was removed from the FBI’s law enforcement component and turned over to its intelligence component. While there are a number of reasons for this baffling move (the Ku Klux Klan as a domestic organization engaged in clearly prosecutable criminal conduct was not a typical candidate for a counterintelligence investigation), it must be noted that it was in part influenced by the fact that many in official Washington believed the high degree of collaboration between Southern law enforcement and the Klan made prosecutions impossible. The FBI created a new COINTELPRO targeting white hate groups.

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During the Church Committee’s hearings, one of its Klan informants, Gary Rowe, gave chilling testimony claiming that the Birmingham Police had told the Klan they had fifteen minutes to beat up the Freedom Riders. Rowe told the FBI this and they did nothing. Rowe himself participated in this violence and perjured himself in court about it with the FBI’s knowledge.

When Rowe testified he did so wearing a white pillowcase with eyes cut out over his head. He had entered the witness protection program and was unwilling to show his face in public. When the Ku Klux Klan murdered civil rights activist Viola Liuzzo after the Selma to Montgomery voting rights march, Rowe was in the car with the shooters. While his testimony put others in jail, they would later claim Rowe fired the fatal shot. Similarly, Rowe later came under suspicion for involvement in the Birmingham Church bombing.

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The FBI’s anti-communist mission had given it wide latitude in operations against those working toward racial justice. Yet in 1967, the FBI created a new COINTELPRO, to target “Black Nationalist-Hate Groups” (the term Black Extremists was also frequently used — a fact that is of particular note given the FBI’s recent designation of “Black Identity Extremists” as a terror threat). Whereas the US Senate found the FBI’s counterintelligence operations against white hate groups were the most narrowly targeted and pertained the closest to those who engaged in violence, they found its operations against “Black extremists” to be the most vicious and violent of any of the COINTELPRO operations.

Finally, in 1968, the FBI created its final official COINTELPRO operation, this one targeting the New Left. This was the broadest of any of the COINTELPROs. The New Left, at least when used by the FBI, was essentially a meaningless term used to describe everything from opposing the Vietnam War to supporting women’s or gay rights.